

Skills for Global Communication: Pursuing a positive learning environment

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Abstract

Seido Language Institute of Kobe, Japan, published the four-skills textbook, Skills for Global Communication, in the spring of 2006. It had been piloted at the University of Hyogo from the spring of 2004, and was formally adopted as the required text for all first-year English-language students at that university at the time of its formal publication. In this paper the researchers, and authors of the textbook, will explicate key pedagogical frameworks from the book and accompanying teacher's manual and will provide cogent proposals on the application of said frameworks in the language classroom. This elucidation of such structural knowledge and its application to practice will prove valuable to those educators currently utilizing the text and will offer insights to those weighing the possibilities of its usage in their classrooms. The central question that will drive this article is the following: How may the materials provided in the textbook package be best utilized to improve the classroom environment and thereby assist students in their pursuit of English comprehension and production?

Introduction

Skills for Global Communication is comprised of twelve lessons, with each lesson being divided into three sections: reading, writing, and speaking. Supplemental listening tasks round out the four-skill set of the textbook. The textbook design and format were informed by four factors: (1) over three decades of combined teaching experience in North America, Asia, and the Indian subcontinent, (2) influential language comprehension tests that Japanese students might be expected to take, primarily the TOEIC® test, (3) the bilingual ability and bicultural understanding of one of the authors, and (4) the benefit of one term with minimal teaching duties that allowed one of the researchers to visit classes, interview teachers, and conduct cross referential studies of materials that were being used at the university at the time.

Since its formal publication in 2006, many university teachers throughout Japan have adopted *Skills for Global Communication* for use in their classrooms; however, it began as a university publication that was dedicated to serving the needs of University of Hyogo students. The researchers would like to share insights into methods that have worked in their classrooms at the

University of Hyogo as they have utilized the textbook. As stated earlier, the central question that drives this research dialog rests on the materials provided in the textbook and the teacher's manual and their application to best promote a positive environment in the language classroom. A positive environment, one in which the student feels that he or she belongs, is energized by the material presented, and yes, is having some fun in the pursuit of English language fluency, will best promote actual language learning. This is basically a case of intentionally reducing the affective filter, those elements of fear, frustration, and a lack of fortitude that impede the learning process.

We can thank the many researchers in applied linguistics, especially Stephen Krashen (1985), who have dealt with the issue of the *affective filter*. It is a theory that is largely regarded as axiomatic in the profession due to its resonance in the experience of teachers. In the case of the researchers, its validity is evident in the over thirty years of combined teaching experience. More detail concerning the affective filter will be offered later in the monograph.

This paper will be divided in the following manner: (1) a brief explanation of the affective filter hypothesis, (2) a definition and discussion of classroom environment as it pertains to student-centered learning, (3) a survey of pedagogical concepts from *Skills for Global Communication* and its accompanying teacher manual and their applications in pursuit of a student-centered learning environment, and (4) a discussion of future research tasks and concluding remarks.

The Affective Filter Hypothesis

What is the Affective Filter Hypothesis? It is an educational theory articulated by Stephen Krashen (1985) that says, basically, that certain negative affective states such as anxiety combine to throw up a mental block to language acquisition and inhibit the student from accepting language input in a useful manner. In situations where the language student is unduly uncomfortable, language learning is hampered, impeded or even shut down. It would be useful here to use Krashen's (1987) own words to describe the impact that a high Affect Filter has on the learner:

The Affective Filter Hypothesis captures the relationship between affective variables and the process of second language acquisition by positing that acquirers vary with respect to the strength or level of their Affective Filters. Those whose attitudes are not optimal for second language acquisition will not

only tend to seek less input, but they will also have a high or strong Affective Filter - even if they understand the message, the input will not reach that part of the brain responsible for language acquisition, or the language acquisition device. Those with attitudes more conducive to second language acquisition will not only seek and obtain more input, they will also have a lower or weaker filter. They will be more open to the input, and it will strike "deeper" (p. 31).

Interestingly, psychologist Charles Curran came to regard many of the anxieties that language learners exhibit as the same type of mental stresses that he had observed in psychotherapy (Curran, 1976). Examples of these anxieties include such issues as fear of competition, failure complexes, fear of rejection, and self-doubt (Taylor, 1987).

Classroom environment

According to Stephen Krashen (2003) language learning is best done with adequate input that is provided in a low-anxiety setting. Curran (1976) emphasized the importance of this low-anxiety setting and promoted the idea of a classroom structure based on cooperation, security, and positive interplay between the instructor, the student and his or her classmates.

Classroom management, the structuring of the class to produce academic results, the order and rules that are necessary in ensuring an orderly classroom atmosphere, are the responsibility of the teacher to present and maintain (Allwright, 1979). So, the question could be asked, how can a student-centered learning environment be achieved without infringing on the responsibility of the teacher to maintain order and avoid chaos in the classroom?

Stevick (1980) addresses this issue. He drew a distinction between what he considered to be teacher control and what he viewed as student initiative. Control, he felt, deals with the establishment of classroom procedures, the presentation of classroom activities, and the review of student performance in the accomplishment of said activities. At the beginning of each course of instruction, at the start of a term for example, the instructor must hold central authority in the classroom. This is conducive to producing a stable and safe environment for the students. As the term continues, and as part of a public policy in the classroom, the teacher could share some of this responsibility for the maintenance of structure and order and the presentation and review of curriculum with the students, caring always that the students are kept within a framework of personal comfort and security. This, according to Stevick (1980), allowed for student initiative. The following is his explanation of control and initiative:

[In] exercising “control,” then, the teacher is giving some kind of order, or structure, to the learning space of the student. In encouraging him to take “initiative,” she is allowing him to work, and to grow, within that space. The trick, for the teacher, is not only to preserve this distinction; it is also to provide just the right amount of learning space. If there is too little, the learner will be stifled. If there is too much, the student will feel that the teacher has abandoned him (p. 20).

Curran (1976) held many of the same views as Stevick, and argued that a student would be receptive to learning only if he or she was allowed to exercise some responsibility for the learning environment and learning procedures and tasks. Hence, a student-centered approach to classroom management and structure was the key to attaining educational goals.

In this next section the researchers will detail seven activities and teaching techniques from *Skills for Global Communication* that allow for a secure learning environment but also provide a classroom atmosphere where students take initiative for elements of their own learning. In other words, these activities are imbued with the ideals of a student-centered educational approach.

Seven student-centered activities and techniques

There are seven activities and techniques that will be examined in this section of the monograph. In the order in which they will be addressed (1) picture activities, (2) interviews and surveys, (3) vocabulary charts, (4) textbook speaking activities, (5) one-minute speeches, (6) peer editing, and (7) student note cards.

(1) Picture activities

At the beginning of each lesson in *Skills for Global Communication*, resides a picture activity. For example, in the second lesson, *Dates and Hobbies*, the student is offered two pictures. In the first picture, Picture A, a sign is shown that advertises a Chinese restaurant, and in the second picture, Picture B, two women are shown engaged in a karate match or practice. The pictures are accompanied by a set of questions. For Picture A the questions ask the student to identify the type of restaurant that is being advertised, an opinion about whether the student likes the food served at this type of restaurant, what the student’s favorite type of restaurant is, and how often the student goes out to a restaurant. For Picture B the student is asked to identify the sport that is shown, the part of the world that this sport originated in, whether or not the student would like to learn the sport shown, and what sports the student engages in.

In both sets of questions, the discourse goes from the concrete and external to the more nuanced and personal. The student begins the activity by simply stating factual information about the pictures but then is prompted to generate personal responses about personal topics.

Another example may be taken from Lesson 4, *Ailments*. In that lesson, the student is again presented with two pictures. In Picture A, a young girl is shown sitting in a wheelchair, wearing a hospital gown, and holding stuffed toy. In Picture B a surgeon is shown performing surgery in a hospital operating room. After a series of interpretive questions (i.e., *What might be wrong with the little girl in Picture A?* and *What is happening in Picture B?*), the student is then asked to create a short story generated from the combination of the two pictures. This moves the task from factual to fictional, but allows the student the opportunity to take the context and generate his or her own English to accomplish the task. Further, there is no right or wrong response in this activity, only the reference to whether the task is undertaken and completed.

(2) Interviews and surveys

In each of the twelve lessons there is an opportunity for the student to be interviewed and interview other students or conduct a survey about the lesson topic. In lesson 2, *Dates and Hobbies*, the student is taken through a staged interview process. Initially, the student is asked to identify leisure activities from a list of nine activities. The student is then asked to state what he or she does for leisure, after this the student is asked to complete a chart (Fig. 1), where he or she reflects on his or her typical weekend day and catalogs a typical allocation of time and activities (Dougherty and Dougherty, 2006: 23).

How do you spend your time on weekends? Complete the chart.

- a) On the weekend I sleep for _____ hours each day.
- b) On the weekend I study for _____ hours each day.
- c) On the weekend I do chores for _____ hours each day.
- d) On the weekend I have fun for _____ hours each day.
- e) On the weekend I _____ for _____ hours each day.

TOTAL HOURS: _____ 24 HOURS

Figure 1. Time allocation chart from Lesson 2.

After quietly completing the chart, the student is then asked the following questions: *Are you happy with the way you spend your weekends? Would you like to change anything in the list above? If so, what would you change?* This allows the student to generate enough information, and to comprehend what is being asked about said information, in the next section of the interview process.

In the second half of the interview the student is asked to interview a partner (and by context, be interviewed) about the hourly division of his or her typical weekend day. After this stage, the focus temporarily goes to the teacher, who is interviewed by a student for the benefit of the class. The teacher is asked this series of question dealing with his or her “perfect” weekend: *What would your teacher do, where would your teacher go, and who would your teacher spend time with?* This provides the opportunity for the teacher to offer an example response in preparation for the student to interview, and be interviewed by, a partner regarding the same questions.

Another example of this technique for interviews comes from Lesson 12, *Speculating about the Past and Present*, where students are asked to talk about their dream vacations. Again the student is led through a series of questions and activities to generate enough familiarity with the topic and key words to prepare for an interview.

In the first task regarding the dream vacation topic, the student is given the opportunity to select several descriptive words from a selection box to complete a sentence describing his or her dream vacation. For example, a student might select the words “thrilling” and “dangerous” to complete the descriptive sentence, writing, *“Wouldn’t it be great if I had a dream vacation that was thrilling and dangerous.”* Afterwards, the student is asked to select from a set of activities for the vacation to complete a statement about the vacation. For example, a student might choose “mountain climbing.” He or she would then complete the statement by writing, *“On my dream vacation I would go mountain climbing.”* The student is then given a chance to write down two more personally generated activities for their vacation.

As a final stage before the interview the student is asked to identify whom he or she might select to accompany him or her on this dream vacation. Possible choices are given as family, friends, pets, teachers, boyfriend, girlfriend, a celebrity, or alone.

At the interview stage, the teacher is interviewed first, in front of the class. The interviewer can be a randomly selected student. The basic questions are listed as, (1) *Where would you go if you*

could take a one-month dream vacation? (2) Why would you go there? (3) Who will you go with? and, finally, (4) What activities would you do? (Dougherty and Dougherty, 2006: 162).

After the instructor answers these questions, and the students write down the answers in the textbook, each student is required to interview two classmates using the same questions. These procedures allow the instructor to model answers and add cogent information to the basic responses, fleshing out a greater exchange of information. For example, rather than just responding to question three by stating that she would go with family members on her dream vacation, the instructor could add that she would take her husband and children because it would be a valuable bonding time or because it would be educational for the children, etc.

What is significant about this pedagogical format for interviews and surveys is that, while the student is given guidance in generating the linguistic tools necessary to complete the task, and is offered examples generated from the teacher for guidance, he or she is still responsible for creating a unique, personal, response to the interview questions. The student is neither thrown to the wolves nor given all the answers on a silver platter. He or she is offered assistance, but the final steps must be accomplished on his or her own.

(3) Vocabulary chart

A vocabulary chart such as that in Figure 2 is provided in each of the twelve lessons in the textbook (Dougherty and Dougherty, 2006). The concept behind the activity is that the students will generate vocabulary information for themselves and for the class in general.

The vocabulary words are generated from the readings in the textbook or from the activities that precede the vocabulary chart. The chart may be done individually, but the textbook authors make it a classroom activity and involve the whole class in the process. Once five words are generated from the readings or activities the instructor divides the words up among five student teams and then the student teams complete the chart and the process together.

What is the process? The process involves students identifying the word type for their assigned vocabulary word, whether it is a verb, noun, adjective, etc., writing a definition of the word in English, drawing a picture that illustrates the word's meaning, using the word in a new sentence, and then identifying, if possible, one antonym and one synonym for the vocabulary word. After the group is finished completing the chart for its assigned word, one or two students are selected from each group to proceed to the board and complete the chart for the sake of their

classmates. After each group is done writing its answers, the instructor quickly makes any necessary adjustments to the material, and then all the students use the information from the board to complete their individual charts in their textbooks.


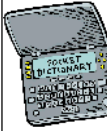


Word 	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
Word Type					
Definition 					
Picture 					
Use it in a sentence 					
Write one synonym (≅) or one antonym (opposite)					

Figure 2. Sample vocabulary chart (Dougherty and Dougherty, 2006).

To complete the chart individually would be time consuming and fraught with opportunities for error in nuance or meaning. By completing the chart as a class the frustration level is negated, the responses are more meaningful, and the teacher has an opportunity to correct the information in a quick, painless, and non-threatening way. The charts are perfect, the students have a sense of accomplishment, and they now have more vocabulary in their corpus. Also, something that has been observed by the researchers is that this also provides students a chance to exhibit their artistic skills. Often the student teams will send up more than one student to complete its chart, having one person who has some artistic merit assigned to complete the drawing while another student completes the written sections of the chart. This shows that students are identifying each other’s strengths and are giving credit to those strengths via labor division. Though anecdotal, this factor is felt to be one more instance of a lowering of learner anxiety and the promotion of a positive environment in the classroom.

(4) Textbook speaking activities

The final section of each lesson deals directly with speech production activities. Titled, *Expressions and Functions for Speaking*, each of these sections has two parts: a set of expressions to use when speaking about the designated topic and a set of functions for speaking. Each section gives examples and then gives the student the opportunity to generate his or her own English to address tasks. To illustrate, we will examine the speaking section of lesson 10, *Satisfaction and Regret*.

The first section, dedicated to introducing a set of phrases useful in communicating the expression of satisfaction and the expression of regret, lists the target phrases and idiomatic structures as shown in Figure 3.

Expressing satisfaction:

1. Thank goodness I studied English.
2. I'm glad that I went to university.
3. I'm happy that I stopped smoking.
4. I've never regretted learning how to sew.
5. It's a good thing that I moved into my own apartment.

Expressing regret:

1. I wish I had studied Chinese.
2. I wish I hadn't become a banker.
3. I should have become a history teacher.
4. I shouldn't have quit my summer job.
5. It was stupid of me not to have studied for that test.
6. If only I had studied harder I would have passed that English test.
7. I regret spending so much money on gambling.

Figure 3. Target phrases and idiomatic expressions from Lesson 10.

Students are then provided with a space titled, *Now your turn*, where they are asked to generate two new expressions, one a statement of satisfaction and the other an expression of regret.

The second portion of the speaking section lists functions for speaking. A function, in the case of linguistics, is a word or phrase used in a particular construction. In the case of Lesson 10,

there are three sets of functions. Each is formulated as a miniature dialog. They are exhibited in Figure 4.

1. Expressing satisfaction about past events:

A: I'm really glad I decided to move to Canada after college.

B: Really, why is that?

2. Expressing regret over past events and replying to such expressions:

A: I should've studied computers in college.

B: Well, I wouldn't worry about it.

A: I wish I had studied computers, if I had, I would be making more money.

B: Maybe you would, maybe you wouldn't. Nothing is certain, you know.

A: I know, but still, I wish I hadn't majored in French. I'm not happy teaching French to junior high school students.

B: Well, it could be worse.

3. Expressing satisfaction in an occupation:

A: I bet that you're happy that you became an automotive engineer.

B: Yes, I love designing new cars. I find it very creative.

A: How is the pay?

B: It's not a fortune, but I'm happy with my salary.

Figure 4. Linguistic functions from Lesson 10.

As with the first portion of the speaking section, the student is then asked, as an individual or as the member of a partnership or team, to generate a new dialog using the expressions and functions that have been exhibited, as well as creating their own functions and expressions. Here is the specific assignment as given in the textbook: *"Now your turn -- Take the two functions that we have just reviewed and use them to create one dialog between two people. Your dialog should have six to ten sentences."*

This format promotes a positive experience in generating English communication. Examples are provided first, short responses are then elicited (to boost confidence), and then students have the opportunity to generate a complete and creative dialog. All of this is done with the assistance of copious linguistic support via examples of idiomatic expressions and functions and is done at

the end of a lesson dedicated to the discussion of the topics of satisfaction and regret. The student, if he or she follows the format of the lesson, will have little risk of foundering.

(5) One-minute speeches

The one-minute speech activity comes from the *Skills for Global Communication* teacher's manual. Its basic aim is to encourage students to express themselves. The exercise places them in front of the class, or a smaller sub-group, where they are expected to speak on a set topic, using body language, and at least one visual aide. Each speech, as done in the researchers' classrooms, also involves a peer grader and a peer "questioner," selected randomly. The peer grader joins the instructor in the task of evaluating the effectiveness of the speech and the student questioner is tasked with preparing a simple question for the speaker about the topic presented. Hence, for each speech, a minimum of three students are directly vested in giving, listening to, judging, or preparing a question about, the topic at hand. Figure 5 includes examples of the Peer Judge Sheet and the Self Evaluation Sheet.

Specific directions from the teacher's manual are as follows:

A very good idea is to model a One Minute Speech for the students first. Show them what an excellent speech should look like (in your opinion). If you can, videotape the speeches so students can see themselves presenting their speeches and doing the self critique included with this assignment. You might do this as a Lesson activity, a Chapter activity, or as a mid-term assignment, or as you finish the textbook.

You might consider having one student assigned (or more) to ask one question to the student speaker after the speech. You might also have student judges rate the speech along with you. This insures that a few of the students will be following the speech very closely.

Speech Judging Sheet:

Presenter Name: _____ ID#: _____

Topic: _____ Score: _____/25 points

	Good				Bad	
<i>Physical:</i>						
Eye Contact	5	4	3	2	1	0
Gestures	5	4	3	2	1	0
<i>Verbal:</i>						
Pronunciation	5	4	3	2	1	0
Rhythm/Intonation	5	4	3	2	1	0
Word Choice	5	4	3	2	1	0

One Minute Speech Self Evaluation

Name: _____

Topic: _____

A. Circle the answer that describes your speech.

- 1. I spoke loudly and clearly. Yes No
- 2. I spoke for at least one minute. Yes No
- 3. I looked at the class. Yes No
- 4. I used body language and smiled. Yes No
- 5. I used a visual aide. Yes No

B. On a scale of 1 - 5, I would rate my speech:

Bad		So-So		Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

Figure 5. Peer Judge Sheet and the Self Evaluation Sheet

Student speakers are given a simple spider-graph to utilize as a prompt as they prepare and deliver their speeches. The topics for the speeches are generated from the lesson material. A set of possible topics for the speeches is also given in the teaching manual. Examples of topic sets from lessons 2 and 10, *Dates and Hobbies* and *Satisfaction and Regret*, respectively (Dougherty and Dougherty, 2006: T.M., pgs. 77 - 78):

Lesson 2: What are your hobbies? How long have you been practicing them? Why do you like them? Is there a hobby you would like to try? Why?

Lesson 10: What was the worst problem that a friend or relative of you has had? What advice did you give him or her (or what advice would you have liked to give him or her)?

The use of one-minute speeches lends itself to the active learning of communicative strategies such as gesture skills, articulation, and organizational formats. In the researchers' classrooms the one-minute speech is viewed as an opportunity for the student to act on the material contained in the lessons and to share more personal information than would be possible within the constraints of the textbook itself.

Due to time constraints, students give only two such speeches in the course of a term; yet, it provides an environment where positive peer pressure has usually proved effective in maintaining a good to excellent level of speeches. Additionally, the use of peer judges and peer questioners require students to be involved in each other's presentations. This breaks down barriers between students, encourages attention, and ties together class work holistically.

(6) Peer editing

In each of the twelve lessons in *Skills for Global Communication* there is a writing assignment. These assignments range across a multitude of topics and set writing styles. Students are asked to write a resume and cover letter, a movie review, a letter of invitation, a letter to an advice column, a travel brochure, and several other types of writing. In each of the writing sections is a peer-editing page.

The editing page is a very straightforward. It has a checklist that asks the student editor if he or she has checked the spelling, the grammar, and the punctuation. Then, the peer editor is asked if he or she understood the writing. Finally, the peer editor is asked to sign the page indicating that the peer editing is finished.

The concept behind peer editing is that it will give the student a chance to have his or her work checked by another student and also that he or she will have the chance to see the work that other students are doing. How often does a student have the chance to carefully read another student's paper? Peer editing also promotes the writing process as a team effort rather than a

solitary endeavor. It has been noted by the researchers that students will devote considerable time to editing a partner's paper. There is a sense of responsibility engendered in the editing process. It has also been noted that students will have their first draft ready for editing on the designated day if they know that they will have other students waiting to review and edit their papers.

The first time a class goes through the editing process the instructor should take time to familiarize them with whatever editing marks he or she deems necessary. The usual time frame for a peer editing session is ten to fifteen minutes. One of the researchers has tried a round-robin format for the peer editing session. The students pass their writings around to five other students. This is effective, but rather time consuming, taking upwards of forty-five minutes to accomplish.

Students tend to be very successful at locating spelling and punctuation errors, but might need more time to find syntax mistakes or grammatical errors. With time, students become familiar with the editing process and the level of writing can improve. At the least, the process makes students feel less alone in their pursuit of writing skills.

(7) Student cards

The *Skills for Global Communication* teacher's manual includes a template for a student card. These cards are simple in nature. The cards can be anywhere from the size of a playing card to the size of a B5 sheet. The card asks the student to write some general information: Name in roman letters, name in kanji (Chinese characters) if applicable, student number, a name to be used in the class setting, and finally, and most important for the instructor, a photograph of the student.

The uses of these cards are multitude. The researchers have used them to quickly divide the class into random teams, to select the order of speakers for one minute speeches, to obtain peer judges and questioners, and, most importantly, to select students to respond to questions, to tasks in front of the class or on the board. One of the researchers structures his class around their use. He maintains a "not spoken" pile and a "spoken pile" on his classroom podium. As he encounters possibilities for students to answer questions, he takes his not spoken set of cards, spreads them out in his hand like a deck of playing cards, and has a student select a card. The student whose card is selected is then required to answer the question or do the task. Once the question is answered or the task accomplished, the student's card is then enshrined in the

“spoken” pile. Occasionally, for some topics or tasks, the researcher will hold both piles up and let a student choose a person from either group. This prevents the “spoken” group from getting complacent.

This simple tool allows the teacher to avoid the pitfall of always calling on the few bright-eyed students in the class. Also, it makes every student aware that he or she will be called on to participate in the class.

Future research tasks and concluding remarks

This monograph dealt with seven activities and teaching techniques from *Skills for Global Communication* that have proven useful in the researchers’ university classrooms and have, in the opinion of the researchers, helped to lower the affective filters of the students and promoted positive classroom environments. However, a question remains that intrigues the researchers and will be a focus of future academic work. The questions are these:

1. How do the individual students perceive the seven activities and techniques presented in this monograph?
2. Which of the seven activities and techniques are most effective in reducing students’ affective filter?
3. Do the activities and techniques improve the classroom environment for the student, and, if so, how?

The answer to these questions would most likely be generated via student questionnaires and focus groups aimed at answering these and related questions in regard to each of the activities.

We do have an oblique answer to this question in hand, however, via class evaluations from the past year that have two questions that ask students to rate on a five point scale (with five being excellent and one being poor) the following (University of Hyogo, 2006):

Were the class materials, the textbook and handouts, effective?

Were the teacher’s explanations and materials easy to understand?

In the case of the two researchers, students answered these questions by rating, on average, above four points. This was consistent over the course of a total of six classes and represented the opinions of approximately one hundred and fifty students. This is a strong indication of

success. Anecdotal evidence generated from the classrooms of the researchers have also supported the success of *Skills for Global Communication* in its promotion of a positive classroom environment. However, more research is needed and desired.

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